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An Outline of European Architecture

Introduction

A BICYCLE SHED is a building; Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture. Nearly everything that encloses space on a scale sufficient for a human being to move in, is a building; the term architecture applies only to buildings designed with a view to æsthetic appeal. Now æsthetic sensations may be caused by a building in three different ways. First, they may be produced by the treatment of walls, proportions of windows, the relation of wall-space to window-space, of one story to another, of ornamentation such as the tracery of a 14th-century window, or the leaf and fruit garlands of a Wren porch. Secondly, the treatment of the exterior of a building as a whole is æsthetically significant, its contrasts of block against block, the effect of a pitched or a flat roof or a dome, the rhythm of projections and recessions. Thirdly, there is the effect on our senses of the treatment of the interior, the sequence of rooms, the widening out of a nave at the crossing, the stately movement of a baroque staircase. The first of these three ways is two-dimensional; it is the painter's way. The second is three-dimensional, and as it treats the building as volume, as a plastic unit, it is the sculptor's way. The third is three-dimensional too, but it concerns space; it is the architect's own way more than the others. What distinguishes architecture from painting and sculpture is its spatial quality. In this, and only in this, no other artist can emulate the architect. Thus the history of architecture is primarily a history of man shaping space, and the historian must keep spatial problems always in the foreground. This is why no book on architecture, however popular its presentation may be, can be successful without ground plans.

But architecture, though primarily spatial, is not exclusively spatial. In every building, besides enclosing space, the architect models volume and plans surface, i.e. designs an exterior and sets out individual walls. That means that the good architect requires the sculptor's and the painter's modes of vision in addition to his own spatial imagination. Thus architecture is the most comprehensive of all visual arts and has a right to claim superiority over the others.

This æsthetic superiority is, moreover, supplemented by a social superiority. Neither sculpture nor painting, although both are

rooted in elementary creative and imitative instincts, surround us to the same extent as architecture, act upon us so incessantly and so ubiquitously. We can avoid intercourse with what people call the Fine Arts, but we cannot escape buildings and the subtle but penetrating effects of their character, noble or mean, restrained or ostentatious, genuine or meretricious. An age without painting is conceivable, though no believer in the life-enhancing function of art would want it. An age without easel-pictures can be conceived without any difficulty, and, thinking of the predominance of easel-pictures in the 19th century, might be regarded as a consummation devoutly to be wished. An age without architecture is impossible as long as human beings populate this world.

The very fact that in the 19th century easel-painting flourished at the expense of wall-painting and ultimately of architecture, proves into what a diseased state the arts (and Western civilisation) had fallen. The very fact that the Fine Arts to-day seem to be recovering their architectural character makes one look into the future with some hope. For architecture did rule when Greek art and when mediæval art grew and were at their best; Raphael and Michelangelo still conceived in terms of balance between architecture and painting. Titian did not, Rembrandt did not, nor did Velasquez. Very high æsthetic achievements are possible in easel-painting, but they are achievements torn out of the common ground of life. The 19th century and, even more forcibly, some of the most recent tendencies in the fine arts have shown up the dangers of the take-it-or-leave-it attitude of the independent, self-sufficient painter. Salvation can only come from architecture as the art most closely bound up with the necessities of life, with immediate use and functional and structural fundamentals.

That does not, however, mean that architectural evolution is caused by function and construction. A style in art belongs to the world of mind, not the world of matter. New purposes may result in new types of building, but the architect's job is to make such new types both æsthetically and functionally satisfactory—and not all ages have considered, as ours does, functional soundness indispensable for æsthetic enjoyment. The position is similar with regard to materials. New materials may make new forms possible, and even call for new forms. Hence it is quite justifiable, if so many works on architecture (especially in England) have emphasised their importance. If in this book they have deliberately been kept in the back-

ground, the reason is that materials can become architecturally effective only when the architect instils into them an æsthetic meaning. Architecture is not the product of materials and purposes—nor by the way of social conditions—but of the changing spirits of changing ages. It is the spirit of an age that pervades its social life, its religion, its scholarship and its arts. The Gothic style was not created because somebody invented rib-vaulting. The Gothic spirit existed and expressed itself in rib-vaults, as has been proved and will be mentioned again later, before the constructional possibilities of the rib had been discovered. The Modern Movement did not come into being because steel-frame and reinforced-concrete construction had been worked out—they were worked out because a new spirit required them.

Thus the following chapters will treat the history of European architecture as a history of expression, and primarily of spatial expression.